

The cult of the Immaculate Conception and the abortion controversy: some historical re-considerations

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Summary

The Catholic rebel theologian Hans Küng attributes the current stand of the Roman Catholic Church against abortion to the Marian cult of the Immaculate Conception. In this paper, I will trace the historical development of this cult, which according to Küng has no historical or theological reference but is only a Medieval fabrication, while referring to Muslim sources and other historical sources, which are of Eastern Christian inspiration. Islam is a major source for the study of the origins of the importance of Mary, in particular, for the unique references to the Immaculate Conception of Mary. I shall then move to explore the expansion of the devotion of the Immaculate Conception in the West and show how and why it began to be associated with the debate on abortion that developed in the European Catholic South in the late 16th century and explain how this is a development of Medieval cult devotion. Reference will be made to Marina Warner's book, *Alone of All Her Sex*. This book covers important historical ground, but the author's manipulation of the facts leads to questionable historical claims. References will also be made to Hans Küng's work, as one of the most vociferous critics of this cult. The paper proceeds to explore the contribution of Maltese theologians, as well as to Alpheran De Bussan, Bishop of Malta, concerning the Catholic Church's view on abortion. I shall explain how this led to the rediscovery of a safe Caesarean section. Early iconographic representations of the Immaculate Conception were executed in a way to promulgate an anti-abortion message. Finally, I will explore how Victorian art and its colonial heritage shaped the representation of Our Lady in the 19th century.

This 19th- century imagery helped shape the theological mindset expressed by both Warner and Küng.

Introduction

In his review of Miri Rubin's book *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary*, the former archbishop and head of the Anglican Church, Dr Rowan Williams states that the Blessed Virgin is the most fortunate woman in human history, because she represents everything that women aspired to in life, i.e. being a maiden and mother at the same time. In a way, Williams' theological remarks are a sort of ontological defence of the negative views expressed by both Hans Küng and Marina Warner towards this devotion. Both Küng and Warner view the history of Mariology as the reason for the submissiveness of women in Catholic Europe.¹ Both attempted to explain the issue of the Virgin Birth of Jesus from an anthropological angle, relying on history to support their sociological scepticism. Their research provided the background to the history of this devotion, and how it intertwines with the history of abortion. Warner describes Mary as "*the culmination of womanhood*"² but at the same time considers paradoxical the cult that ensued, mainly in the West, around the Virgin Birth.³

Edmund Leach notices that the non-rational concept of Virgin Birth is found in different cultures but it is only within Christianity that it became a theological and moral issue in its own right closely linked to the sophisticated concept of the Immaculate Conception.⁴ Paradoxically, following Martin Luther's style of argument, Anglican Rowan Williams defends this Catholic stand, which is under attack from the anthropological left, by building his critical review on a series of contrasting comparisons. Mary is the only woman ever to have succeeded in obtaining universal recognition of such a dual condition. She is portrayed as the ideal woman, a model for any mother, married or single, who knows how to raise a family. She is an extremely humble woman but, at the same time, has infinite power.⁵

1 Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex. The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (Oxford University Press, 1976), 177.

2 Ibid., xx.

3 Ibid., xxi.

4 Edmund Leach, 'Virgin Birth', The Henry Myers Lecture 1966, *Proceedings of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 1966, 42, 44, 45.

5 Rowan Williams, review, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* by Miri Rubin, in *Financial Times*, 13 February 2009, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/d856ce24-f95f-11dd-90c1-000077b07658.html#axzz2W0pTK7qF>.

Rubin discusses the historical paradox of how a meek woman like Mary, having no social or political standing and living in a village, which was a backwater of the Roman Empire, achieved such historical significance. She rightly thinks that the modern sceptic will qualify this as an accident of history, the result of an historical reconstruction of a woman who is mentioned, sporadically, in the Gospels. Others consider this as one of the wonders of Christianity. Even her name meaning 'a drop in the sea',⁶ was one of the most common in Palestine in her days.⁷ Taking into consideration the ancient rituals related to the fertilization of both land and water, such a name had a charged sexual connotation, and the word "drop" could be standing for fecundity of the water by semen. Such an idea has roots in Jewish history. Michael L. Satlow argues that later Babylonian rabbis assumed that semen possessed special powers.⁸ Thanks to the virtues attributed to Mary by Catholic exegetes, her name was stripped of any sexual meaning and instead started to stand for "*purity and motherliness*",⁹ with the result that it became extremely popular worldwide.

From a religious point of view, the image of this meek woman became one of the three or four religious characters to be represented in icons, paintings or sculptures that are still popular even today. Probably, one of the most powerful images of the Blessed Virgin that expresses all her virtues is the iconography of the Immaculate Conception. Such iconography was meant to express visually the strength and meekness, submissiveness and authority bestowed on such an exceptional person. Since neither Mary's birth nor death is described in the Gospels,¹⁰ Mary's Immaculate Conception was considered to lack the necessary historical references.¹¹ Küng goes a step further and affirms that the theological exegesis of the Immaculate Conception has no biblical foundation.¹² Warner concludes that the question of Mary's virginity and her Immaculate Conception are a technicality and were never a matter of primary concern to the Evangelists, as it was to become later.¹³

Warner's arguments express the Euro-centrality of theological debate and can be far removed from the historical truth on the subject. Debate goes back

6 Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, 14. Warner explains that Jerome translated the Hebrew name *Miriam* into Latin as "*Stilla Maris*", "*a drop of the sea*", but the Latin word "*stilla*" was in later days wrongly transliterated as "*stella*", that is "*star of the sea*".

7 Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (Yale University Press, 2009).

8 Michael L. Satlow, "'Wasted Seed', The History of a Rabbinic Idea", *Hebrew Union College Annual* 65 (1994): 137.

9 Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, xxiv.

10 *Ibid.*, 19.

11 *Ibid.*, 24.

12 Hans Küng, *Salviamo la Chiesa* (Milano: Rizzoli, 2011), 263.

13 Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, 22.

to the 4th century and is, in part, related to Augustine of Hippo's discussion on concupiscence. This Father of the Church considered concupiscence a penalty imposed by God for the sin of Adam and Eve; its only antidote was the grace of God.¹⁴ This was followed by St. Augustine's discussion on universal Original Sin in Mankind.¹⁵ It is not the aim of this paper to discuss St. Augustine's doctrine but it should be pointed out that when St. Augustine was formulating these thoughts in the West, a parallel discussion was taking place in the Orient about Mary being without Original Sin, and for this reason, she was called in the West "*sine macula*", Latin words meaning "without any mark" or "immaculate". Therefore, St. Augustine was only codifying existing thoughts when he also discusses the privileged role of Mary within the Christian community and coined the famous phrase "*Decuit, ergo fecit*".¹⁶ When one considers that these thoughts were so geographically widespread, they must have had deep roots to be embraced in the 4th century by Christians of both the Eastern and Western Mediterranean. Yet, the key to the true significance of these depositories rests with the history of the Islamic religion. Thus, historians and theologians must seriously consider looking at the Orient, in particular the contact between Christianity and Islam, to better understand the genesis of this devotion.

Warner concedes that "the worship towards the mother of God sprang up and was fostered in the rites and documents of the eastern peoples of Asia Minor, Egypt and Syria,"¹⁷ while the history of the devotion towards the Immaculate Conception of Mary is also pinned down in the Orient,¹⁸ and is already documented amongst the ascetic movement of the 4th century,¹⁹ while recognizing that the Pseudo-Gospel of James is the main source of inspiration for the devotion towards Mary.

After three centuries of expansion in the East, the monastic movement came under threat from the Moslem invasion of the Holy Land in the 7th century. Some of the monks fled to the Byzantine Empire where the Byzantine quartet of Marian Feast Days continued to develop.²⁰ Feasts days in the Christian East came under pressure again in the 9th century from what is known as the iconoclast persecutions. Monks started to flee to the West, importing with them their rituals. In Italy, in particular, Rome and Sicily became the new centres for these Marian devotions.²¹

On the other hand, those monks who, for one reason or another, failed to escape the Muslim onslaught ended up influencing Muslim theology, in

14 Ibid., 53.

15 Ibid., 245.

16 *It was fitting that He do it. Therefore, He did it.*

17 Ibid., 26.

18 Ibid., 4.

19 Ibid., 52.

20 Ibid., 66.

21 Ibid., 240.

particular, the unique position that Islam bestows on Mary. They were helped by the contact that Islam had already cultivated with the Christians of the Orient, with the result that this new 'religion' was more than ready to borrow concepts from Christian theology, in particular theological thought regarding Mary's conception as well as 'theological' stories related to how Mary preserved her virginity at the birth of Jesus. Such cross-fertilization got lost in the annals of history perhaps because Muslim theology had failed, in its turn, to influence the development of Christian thought in the West. Thus, if one wishes to know more about this historical evolution and its old roots in history, one also needs to look at Muslim writings on the subject.

Muslim Theology on the Immaculate Conception of Mary

Predrag Matvejevic was reflecting on this lost theological hybridity when in his *Breviario Mediterraneo*, he discussed all those features common to the people of the Mediterranean. But when he came to discuss blasphemy, he put himself in a tight spot. While blasphemy is a feature of the Christian West, Predrag Matvejevic realizes that "*Arab blasphemies are not known to us*". He believes that blasphemies do not exist or else are not as bad as those of Christians or that Arabs hid such shortcomings from Christians in the same manner that they hid their women, sometimes unsuccessfully.²² No doubt blasphemy is part of Europe's sub-culture but it would be anthropologically incorrect to attribute the existence of blasphemy within Oriental culture, of which Islam is an integral part. In Islam, swearing takes the form of a malignant prayer,²³ which is comparable to the curse found in Oriental religions, including Orthodoxy and Judaism. Praise is reserved only for the figure of God and the Virgin Mary. Therefore, the culture of blasphemy is Latin and definitely Anglo-Saxon; it is the result of the mixture and influences of different Western European cultures on the Christian Mediterranean.²⁴

Indeed, throughout the Muslim world, anyone mentioning her name in vain would be committing blasphemy. Yet lest we forget, blasphemy was dealt with in the Ten Commandments given to Moses on Mount Sinai, long before the

22 Predrag Matvejevic, *Breviario Mediterraneo* (Milano: Garzanti, 2010), 69-72: "*le bestemmie degli Arabi non ci sono note... presupponiamo che ce ne siano e che non siano più lievi delle nostre, (è come gli Arabi nascondessero le loro bestemmie ai cristiani, come fanno con le donne, ma non sempre ci riescono)*."

23 According to Frans X. Cassar, swear words in Arabic exist but take the form of a curse such as '*Jahraq Allah dinek*' ('May Allah burn your faith'), or '*laghanak Allah*' ('May Allah damn you').

24 In the case of Malta, it was definitely introduced after 1091, when the island passed under the Norman European rulers, and from that year onwards, and for the first time in its history, Malta belonged to the Latin Christian Church.

birth of the prophet Mohammed. The Third Commandment states “*Thou shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain*”. It is worth noting that the Jews applied blasphemy only when referring to God. Their Hebrew language, which unequivocally assigns masculine or feminine gender to all nouns, termed God in the masculine gender. This Commandment was extended to include a woman by both Christians and Muslims, even if, the Spirit of God, the *Shekinah*, was feminine in Hebrew, neuter in the Greek *pneuma*, invariably feminine in Syriac and Maltese, masculine and feminine in Arabic, but in Latin it became incontrovertibly masculine: *Spiritus Sanctus*.²⁵

In fact, both the name of Mary and that of Jesus are mentioned in the sacred book of the Qurân wherein the name of Mary is mentioned more often than in the four Gospels put together.²⁶ Moreover, Mary is the only woman in the Qurân who is referred to by her first name. The Maltese Arabic scholar, Francis X. Cassar rightly observes that usually, in the Orient, women and in particular mothers, are rarely referred to by their name. The Gospels are a proof of this for, in more than one instance, Mary is referred to in relation to her first male offspring, in this case, as the mother of Jesus ‘*Omm Ghisa*’ (أم عيسى).²⁷

In the Qurân, a whole chapter or *Sûra* is dedicated to *Sûret Miriam*.²⁸ All in all, the Qurân has 114 chapters but only 8 are dedicated to a particular person, one of which, chapter 19, is dedicated to Mary while the remaining seven are named after a man.²⁹

Yet, the Qurân is not the sole Islamic Book referring to Mary. Another known book, *Qisas al-anbiya* (the Stories of the Prophets), contains further apocryphal information about the birth of the Virgin. As in the case of the Qurân, it is based mainly on the *Arab Gospel of Childhood*, the *Protoevangelium of Saint James*, and the *Gospel of the Pseudo-Matthew*.³⁰ It is intended to sing her magnitude in the

25 Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, 39.

26 In the Gospels, Mary is mentioned twelve times in Saint Luke under her proper name (1:27.30.34.38.39.41.46.56; 2:5.16.19.34); five times in Saint Matthew (1:16.18.20; 2:11; 13:55); two times in Saint Mark, once under her proper name (6:3) and another as his “mother” (13:31); Saint John refers to her twice and he never calls by her name – the first time is in the story of the Wedding of Cana and the second time is in the story of the Passion. In the Qurân she is mentioned 43 times.

27 Frans X. Cassar, “Marija Mnisla bla Tebgha”, *Annales Celebrationum in Honorem Deiparae Immaculatae Conceptionis Civitatis Cospicuae, Festa 2012* (Malta, 2012), 47-53.

28 Ibid. In this ‘*Sûra*’ one finds the story her birth and that of her son Ghisa (Jesus). The story of the pregnancy of Mary is also mentioned in another Sura, known as ‘*Sûret Âl Ghimrân*’ (*Sûra* III; 35-37).

29 Ibid.

30 Giancarlo Finazzo, “The Virgin Mary in the Koran”, *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition (13 April 1978): 4 (see <http://www.ewtn.com/library/mary/marykran.htm>) and Warner, *Alone*

eyes of God.³¹ Already, in the account of *Qisas al-anbija*, Mary is presented as immaculate, protected from sin or any form of ‘material pollution’ from the moment of her birth.

The next book in Islam which contains reference to Mary is the *ḥadīṭ*, which collects the oral traditions of Judaizing Christians and stories attributed to the Prophet Muhammad by those who lived during his times. These stories were compiled into a book about 200 years after the death of the Prophet. They are mostly the work of al-Muhammad Buhari (810-870) and Muslim ibn-al-Ḥaǧǧāǧ (817/18-874/75). In the *ḥadīṭ* one finds references about Mary attesting to her purity and magnitude. Both Al Muhammad Buḥārī (al anbija: 44) and Muslim-al-Ḥaǧǧāǧ (al fadā'il – 146/7) respectively recount that “*There is not one offspring of Adam, except Mary and her Son, born but is stung by the Devil at the time of their birth, and the child makes a loud noise from the sting*” and “*Every child is stung by the devil as soon as it is born and this sting from the devil makes it scream, excepted are Mariam and her Son.*”³² Once again the Christian influence is clear in this text as the wording reiterates Paul’s letter to the Corinthians “*The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory...*” (1 Cor 15:56-7), with the difference that the emphasis is juxtaposed from God onto Mary.

Thomas Patrick Hughes’s *Dictionary of Islam* relates these passages to the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of Mary. On a theological level, Islam is being extremely clear about the conception of the Virgin Mary, who together with that of her Son, was saved from the sting of the devil at the moment of conception. Muslim theology teaches that all the Prophets, including Mohammed, are not free from sin. Therefore, this exceptional state reserved for Mary and her Son can

of *All Her Sex*, 26, 239. The Book of James narrates that Anna, Mary’s mother, after being ‘temporarily’ abandoned by her husband Joachim, because she was barren, “puts on her bridal dress and wanders out into the garden. There the sight of a nest full of baby sparrows inspires a yet more bitter threnody. But, as she weeps, an angel appears to her and promises her a child”.

31 According to Francis X. Cassar, the book, *Qisas al-anbija*, gives the names of Mary’s parents as Hanna (Anne) and Ghimrân (Joachim). In other words, the author of this book is following the Pseudo-Gospel of James. *Qisas al-anbija* states that her parents were old and childless and despite this fact, they still desired to have a child. The conception of Mary was considered as a gift of God to these two old persons due to the love that they had for God. The mother, Anne, moved by the apparition of a bird feeding its fledglings, prayed to God to give them a child. God listened to her prayers with the result that Mary was conceived. Hanna dedicated her daughter Mary to God. Her father Ghimrân died when his daughter was still young; thus she needed a godparent to take care of her. This responsibility was taken over by Zachary, the father of ‘Jahja’ (John the Baptist). Thus, the girl was brought up in a saintly environment, praying, and God’s angels taking care of her, visiting her and protecting her from sin whilst providing her with all the things that she needed (Cassar, 51).

32 I would like to thank Francis X. Cassar for his literal and literary translation of the Arabic text into English. “مَا مِنْ مَوْلُودٍ يُوَلَّدُ إِلَّا نَحَسَهُ الشَّيْطَانُ فَيَسْتَهْلُ صَارِحًا مِنْ نَحْسَةِ الشَّيْطَانِ إِلَّا ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ وَآمَنَهُ.”

either be linked to the extension in the Orient of St Augustine of Hippo's theology of Jesus being free from Original Sin or related to earlier thoughts preceding St Augustine, on which Augustine then built his arguments that are now lost. The subsequent admission was that Mary too enjoyed this unique privilege. In fact, his book *Contra Julianum*, St Augustine refers to the birth of Mary, and how she did not fall into the clutches of the devil despite being conceived through Adam.³³

On the other hand, George Sale viewed the reference in the *Qurân* (but not those of the *ḥadīṭ*) within doctrinal Islamic canon and affirms that this is a misunderstanding or, better still, a misleading reading of the text since what is meant by the "virginal conception" of Jesus was the preservation of Mary's maiden status at the birth of Jesus. It is for this reason that she is called "Miriam Al-Batûl". But Islamic tradition also holds that after such a miraculous birth, Mary was free to enter into any sexual relationship with her husband and bear his children.

However, when the dogma of Original Sin is viewed within the framework of history, such an interpretation in favour of "vaginal conception" is due to the fact of the change in position in the Muslim world towards this theology of Original Sin. It is this change that in itself confirms historical facts that existed even before St Augustine's time. Muslims started to ignore this theology of original sin, affirming instead that no person should be considered guilty of a crime or sin committed by somebody else, which in this case, was the sin committed by Adam and Eve, but remnants of this theology continued within Islamic tradition. Instead Islam attributes a natural deficiency to Man, which makes him impure and imperfect from birth. What Muslims started to believe was that Mary was never tainted by sin but lived in a pure state. Yet, the denial itself within a religion of the existence of a particular state, as Sale argued in respect of Islam, is proof of a suppressed theological thought in the first hand. In other words, such a denial in Islam reflects a historical memory about a previous theological thought, which, as explained, preceded Islam, but was eventually suppressed and replaced the theological concept of a 'virginal conception'.

The references to Sura III, verses 35-37. of the *Hadith* confirm this and show:

- a. that these thoughts in Islam about Mary are older than the 7th century when they were written;
- b. that this idea finds its origin in Christianity;
- c. that when the conception of Mary was being discussed in Islam, in the West, Mary began to be attributed powers related to help barren women to conceive.

The fragmentary historical information confirms what is being argued in this paper; this theological exegesis goes further back than the 7th century, but it was

33 Ugolin M. Gatt, "L-Agostinjani u s-Santwarju tal-Mellieħa", *Marija Bambina Mellieħa* 1986 (Malta, 1986), 22.

in Islam that this theology made its first appearance in writing. This came about when other areas of the Christian Orient were also discussing the conception of Mary. Historical evidence exists, which shows that at the end of the 7th century, some Christians of Arabia worshipped the Virgin as the third person of the Holy Trinity. According to Giancarlo Finazzo, this inevitably led to disapproval and condemnation by the Prophet of Islam, thus involving the historical person of Mary in new polemics.³⁴

Patristic studies affirm the oriental roots of Christian theology regarding the conception of Mary. The earliest surviving writings go back to the second half of the 7th century. In a recent study, Joseph Bezzina affirms that the first reference to this cult is to be found in the church canons of the East, when St Andrew of Crete (660-740), a theologian, homilist and hymnographer from the monastery of St Saba, near Jerusalem, included the feast of the Immaculate Conception in the church canon. According to Bezzina, this monastery of St Saba was known for its sacred hymns.³⁵ Undoubtedly, this monk (St Andrew) was part of a wider monastic movement whose thoughts are found influencing the west after fellow hermits started to escape westwards due to the Islamic expansion. The influence of these ideas increased during the Iconoclast Movement. St Andrew was not creating a new cult, but confirming a popular devotion towards the Blessed Virgin within the different liturgies in the East and merged them with the liturgy of Byzantium (*Hagia Sophia*) to create one liturgy for the Church.³⁶ It is important to recall that the Marian devotion owes its origins to the Syrian Church.³⁷

Such strong historical evidence disavows claims, explicit or implicit, that the cult of the Immaculate Conception is a 12th century historical theory, as it is normally claimed by those theologians who oppose it. These claims only express the West's historical prejudice towards Islam, including matters concerning its Marian theology. The voluminous series by D'Hubert du Manoir, bearing the title *Maria, Études sur La Sainte Vierge*, fails to make one single reference to the presence of Mary in Islamic thought.

Perhaps, the radical position assumed by Islam in these early centuries may have helped the decline of this cult both in the East and the West and this conditioned the Marian cult not to be associated with the heathen. Ironically, interest in the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin was also discarded in Islam, as

34 Giancarlo Finazzo, "The Virgin Mary in the Koran", vide supra.

35 Joseph Bezzina, "Il-Kult lejn l-Immakulata Kuncizzjoni ta' Marija mill-bidu sas-sena 1854", *Sicut Lilium. Devozzjoni u Ritwal tul is-Sekli*, ed. Charles J. Farrugia (Mqabba/Malta: Soċjetà Mużikali Madonna tal-Ġilju, 2012), 2.

36 Diarmaid MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (New York et alii: Viking Penguin, 2010), 454.

37 Ibid., 225.

the overall veneration for Mary started to run counter to Islam's strict monotheism. In Christianity, the Orthodox East started to emphasize even more the role of Mary as Mother of God. Warner observes that, "*although the Greeks had led the way to the doctrine of the Immaculate Virgin by their cult for her miraculous birth, they opposed the veneration of her as anything but the mother of the Redeemer, and were followed in this by the Reformed Churches*".³⁸ Until the year 1000, the emphasis in the West was mainly on the Virginity of Mary.

Warner rightly concludes that such an image of the Virgin could never be said to have been the tutelary goddess of sex. Instead, Warner explains, the Christian West juxtaposed sex with procreation. Thus the Virgin began to be invoked to bless wedlock and procreation. However, in such cults, one cannot refrain from observing the influence of the older cult of the Immaculate Conception. It is within this new meaning that symbols and images of the Virgin began to be associated in the West with supernatural powers to quicken the womb. The sash worn round Mary's waist became one of the most efficacious relics associated with the power to help barren women become pregnant.³⁹ It was so powerful that like Mary, it began to bear more than one meaning. It was a symbol of fecundity but was also worn to uphold chastity. (This is why a cincture is worn by priests as well as by both male and female members of religious orders). The proof is in the semantic meaning of the title bestowed to the Virgin, that of "the Engirdled". The word "engirdled" has the same roots of the Romance word *enciente* or *incinta* meaning pregnant with child.⁴⁰

Returning to Warner again, this title was mystically intertwined with another reference to Mary, that of the mother who suckled the incarnate God.⁴¹ Mary's milk began to symbolize life and fertility and definitely it did not underpin women to the subjection of their biology, as Warner affirms, or denies them, the freedom to reject it or overcome it through the medical means available.⁴² What Warner failed to notice is that when this cult was at its peak, around the year 1000, there was no substitution for a mother's milk. Any mother without milk meant that her baby could not survive unless she resorted to a wet nurse. Incidentally, the use of wet nurses was never discouraged by the Church.

Warner proceeds to furnish the historical link between this cult and the one of the Immaculate Conception. Once the cult of the Immaculate Conception started to gain ground once again in the 13th century, this would result in the

38 Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, 251.

39 Ibid., 278.

40 Ibid., 279.

41 Ibid., 204.

42 Ibid., 205.

slow decline of this devotion, symbolizing Mary's milk.⁴³ But this change should be linked to the changes in the theological debate that started to take place at the turn of the first millennium, where the emphasis moved from the concept of Mary as the Virgin Mother to that of being the maiden bride of Christ.⁴⁴

Re-awakening a Lost Cult

St. Bernard of Clairvaux is normally attributed to be the 12th century theologian who raised the question of the Immaculate Conception of Mary. It was the case of negative publicity becoming good publicity. Bernard of Clairvaux warns against giving any credence to what he considered was the story circulating around his times about the Immaculate Conception of Mary.⁴⁵ The foundation of new mendicant Orders in the 13th century would give a new impetus to the cult of the Virgin Mary. The Carmelite Friars moved from the East to the West, bringing with them the devotion towards Our Lady of the Scapular. The newly-established order of the Dominicans would foster the devotion towards Our Lady of the Rosary, while the conglomeration of a number of hermits in Italy, into an Order of friars following the rule of St Augustine (thus they began to be known as the Augustinians)⁴⁶ appropriated the devotion towards Our Lady, under the title of the Engirdled.

The debate was taken over by the Franciscans, another Religious Order that was established in this period, in particular, by St Bonaventure. But the work that broke new ground was that of the Oxford-educated Franciscan, John Duns Scotus, known as *Doctor Subtilis*. He became the principal architect of the belief in the Immaculate Conception. He argued that Mary, from the beginning, was preserved from hereditary Original Sin through what he termed 'preventive redemption'. He achieved by adding to St Augustine's celebrated syllogism the word "*potuit*", so that it now read as "*potuit, deuit, ergo fecit*". (He, i.e. God, could; it was fitting he should; so he did).⁴⁷ The defence of the theology of the Immaculate Conception of Mary literally became a battle cry of the Franciscan movement. According to Warner, this rekindled Franciscan interest in the Virgin Mary wrought a revolution in the Christian world concerning the Incarnation. Mary, now, would be identified more and more with the life of women.⁴⁸ In this, the Franciscans would influence

43 Ibid., 205.

44 Ibid., 122.

45 Ibid., 240.

46 Eġidju Galea, *L-Ordni Agostinjan* (Malta: Provincja Agostinjana, 1995), 11-12.

47 Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, 237.

48 Ibid., 179.

the other mendicant Orders, as all of them, sought to foster the virtue of humility and in this new philosophy, the female sex had a particular role to play.⁴⁹ The role of women was set between two extremes but with equal significance; that of childbearers or virgins dedicating their life to God.

From England, the Cult of the Immaculate Conception spread to France, where the Norman students adopted December 8, as their special feast day.⁵⁰ In Syria, it was the day reserved for celebrating the feast of the Virgin Mary. But Rome itself hung back, and it was not until the third decade of the 13th century that the Curia introduced a Mass for the Immaculate Conception on December 8. The dissemination of this theological thought was taking place after the West had re-established contact with Islamic literature through the crusades and the Spanish Reconquista and found its ultimate success within the English monastic movement.

More importantly for my argument, when the Latin West started to seriously discuss the conception of Mary as a *privilegium singularis* (or unique privilege), this debate coincided with the discussion, also in the West, about the issue of the salvation of the aborted foetus. It should be emphasized that these were two separate debates at the time. It is only the 20th century historical narrative that has reconstructed incorrectly these events as one being the cause of the other.

Due to this incorrect historical construction, the debate was mistakenly considered a medieval controversy related to abortion when, in fact, it was mainly a question about miscarriages. Moreover, it was independent of the cult of Immaculate Conception. It was only in the 16th century that the cult of the Immaculate Conception, as I shall explain in the last part of this paper, began to be related to abortion and this was done through iconography. Therefore, it was a coincidence that those Popes who were discussing issues related to abortion (and these were few in the Middle Ages) were also the ones supporting the cult of the Immaculate Conception.

In this Küng expresses the reservation expressed by Thomas Aquinas towards this cult. Aquinas insists that Mary could not have been free from Original Sin at her conception because no one could have been redeemed before the Redemption.⁵¹ During St Thomas Aquinas' time, the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin was not the sole matter under discussion; there was also the theological discussion revolving around the concept of abortion or miscarriages. At the time, these two topics were independent issues. Abortion, or better still *abortus*, in Latin, was understood in terms of miscarriage. The word did not yet carry the general meaning of abortion as it is understood today. The willful termination of a

49 Ibid., 184, 186.

50 Ibid., 241.

51 Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, 241.

pregnancy, as the word abortion is interpreted today, was not practised. This does not mean that it did not exist, but certainly it was not a wildly diffused action. Instead, infanticide was the norm to dispose of unwanted babies, which in itself, is an extremely old custom, predating the advent of Christianity.

Referring to St Thomas and Scholastic theology, Hans Küng argues in favour of abortion. Basing his principles on Aristotelian philosophy, Thomas Aquinas argued that there are three different stages in the formation of a foetus, or what he termed as progressive animation. First there is what he called *animatio successiva* or successive life. The second stage is that of *anima vegetativa*, or vegetative life. The third is when the *anima* becomes rational or *anima intellectualis*. It was at this last stage that the foetus becomes a human being and was at the stage when, according to Aquinas following in the footsteps of Aristotle, the soul entered the human body.⁵² This theological progression had one major hitch. It contained a gender discrepancy. Boys achieved their *anima intellectualis* forty days after conception, but fifty more days were needed for the weaker sex.⁵³ Such an argument was one of the many made in the High Middle Ages to demonstrate that women were inferior to men.

Ironically, modern science does not disprove the main line of thought of this argument. On the contrary, it follows the same logic. First a distinction is made between an embryo and a foetus. Yet scientists do not agree among themselves as to when does an embryo (*anima successiva*) become a foetus (*anima vegetativa*). Certain scientists set it at the end of 12 weeks or three months of intra-uterine life, although successive developmental stages after the 8th week are often termed foetal.⁵⁴ The major change occurs when a foetus becomes capable of having an independent existence outside its mother's womb, which is commonly considered to take place in the 28th week of pregnancy. Using old Medieval logic, it would be at this stage that the baby becomes an *anima intellectualis*. Küng reminds his readers that according to Aquinas, the human being exists only in a rational form and cannot exist outside such a form – *non invenitur nisi in rationali natura*.⁵⁵

Küng rightly states that the cult of the Immaculate Conception brings about a revision to this theological position and now it begins to be argued that the soul enters the body at the moment of conception. It is interesting to note that St Thomas Aquinas was against the theology of the Immaculate Conception. But this had nothing to do with abortion or the question related to the soul of

52 Küng, *Salviamo la Chiesa*, 261.

53 John Haldane and Patrick Lee, "Aquinas on Human Ensoulment, Abortion and the Value of Life", *Philosophy* 78 (2003): 255-278.

54 *Multilingual Demography Dictionary*, English Edition, Second Edition, adapted by Etienne van de Walle (Liège: Ordina Editions, 1982), 74.

55 Küng, *Salviamo la Chiesa*, 262.

miscarried babies. He disapproved the idea that Mary was born without Original Sin, which according to St Augustine, is inherited by every human being from the moment of conception. Aquinas followed Augustine's theology on Original Sin and held that Mary was no different to the rest and was tainted by Original Sin. Aquinas argued that if Mary was conceived without sin one cannot uphold that she was redeemed by Christ.

At this point in Medieval History, the debate on abortion, in the pure Latin sense of *abortus* or miscarriage, began to be discussed in relation to the theological predispositions of eternal salvation assigned to the baptismal ritual. Thus, the debate was about whether aborted fetuses, as a result of miscarriage, could earn eternal salvation in the light of St Augustine's discussion where, in the *De Civitas Dei*, he argues that the unbaptized babies are not saved but are condemned to eternal punishment, even if, in a milder form than normal.⁵⁶

Abortion in Early Modern Times

This Medieval debate led the Council of Florence, in 1439, to decree that anyone who died without baptism went directly to hell. Such a position provoked a major debate among Catholic theologians, and many began to argue about the fate of unborn babies. Babies had to be spared from the fire of hell. The major theological belief at the time was that a premature death of a foetus would still lead the soul of the baby to limbo. The 15th-century humanist Pope Pius II (Enea Silvio Bartolomeo Piccolomini) held that baptism was not a fundamental element for a Christian because divine mercy was greater than the capacity of human power to regulate it.⁵⁷

It was during this debate that a loose link between abortion and the cult of the Immaculate Conception can be traced for the first time. This occurred through pious actions rather than theological discussion. Hans Küng reserves no kind words for this Latin Pope, the Franciscan Sixtus IV (Francesco della Rovere 1414-1480), who in 1476, instituted an elaborate office of worship in honour of the feast of the Immaculate Conception.⁵⁸ Sixtus IV is defined, in Küng's book, *Salviamo la Chiesa*, as "*corrupt*" (*corrotto*) and the author emphasizes the fact that he was a Franciscan friar from the house of della Rovere,⁵⁹ as though one can choose the family in which to be born! Küng juxtaposes the devotion to the Immaculate Conception

56 Augustine of Hippo, *De Civitate Dei* 13.7; EP, 116 :20.

57 Pope Pius II "*riteneva che il battesimo non è fondamentale, perchè la misericordia divina, è più ampia della capacità umana di regolarla*".

58 Küng, *Salviamo la Chiesa*, 243.

59 Ibid., 114.

to the support given by Sixtus IV to members of his family by appointing them to his Curia including some, whose sexual deviations, Küng reminds his reader, were notorious. By highlighting this nepotism, the author wishes to pinpoint that the cult of the Immaculate Conception was/is a *contradictio in adiecto* or a contradiction in itself.⁶⁰ The reason for this is due to the fact that Sixtus IV happened to be also the first Pope to speak formally about aborted fetuses.

As noted by Flandrin, “between the 16th century and the end of the 18th century, the family changed in character and a new morality of family relations was adumbrated.”⁶¹ A new family morality began to be construed and methods of birth control started to become more popular. Abortion was seen as a method of birth control and its popularity coincided with the decline in fecundity in Europe, in particular in France during the 18th century.⁶² This was accompanied by an increased effort on the part of the Catholic Church to defend procreation by discouraging and condemning any method of birth control.⁶³ The theological response was immediate and abortion as the willful termination of pregnancy was discussed and condemned in the second half of the 16th century.

This time, it was the turn of another Franciscan Pope, Sixtus V (Felice Peretti di Montalto) and the acting vice-regent for theological affairs, the Maltese-born Vice-Regent, Leonardo Abela.⁶⁴ By the 16th century, infanticide ceased to be practised, partly as a result of the general efforts to safeguard unwanted children through the institution of a proper care system.⁶⁵ Instead, abortion practices started to gain popularity.

The fact that Peretti chose the name of Sixtus shows his admiration for one of his predecessors, the Franciscan Pope Sixtus IV. Sixtus V was one of the first popes to speak clearly against abortion and through his Papal Bull *Effraenatum* threatened, with excommunication, all those who carried out abortions at any stage of gestation. In cases where expectant mothers were assisted by priests, the latter were to be defrocked, stripped of any acquired benefices and handed over to the secular arm to be punished by death.⁶⁶ The Maltese cleric Leonardo Abela was

60 Ibid., 115.

61 Jean-Louis Flandrin, *Families in Former Times. Kinship, Household and Sexuality* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 216.

62 Jean-Louis Flandrin, *L'Église et le contrôle des naissances* (Paris : Flammarion, 1970).

63 Ibid.

64 A. Petrucci, “Abela”, *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, Vol. 1, (Roma: Treccani, 1960), 46.

65 The first asylum for abandoned infants was set up in Milan in AD 787 by Datheus, Archbishop of Milan (www.mnddc.org).

66 In 1591 Pope Gregory XIV revoked this Bull by Pope Sixtus V, *Effraenatum*, and reinstated the “quickening” position as proposed by Pope Innocent III (1161-1216). Once again, Pope Gregory determined that “quickening” occurred 116 days into pregnancy (16½ weeks). See <http://embryo.asu.edu/pages/pope-gregory-xiv>.

behind such measures, in his position as Vice-Regent to the Pope who appointed him to be directly responsible to oversee decisions of theological significance.⁶⁷

The debate about abortions and the destiny of unborn babies would continue into the following century. The first successful work to go into print on this subject was *De formatrice foetus* by Thomas Fyens, published in 1620. Thomas Fyens formulated his main thesis on the presumption that the soul entered the human body at the moment of conception and not, as argued until then, forty or ninety days (depending on gender) from conception. These post-Tridentine discussions triggered further debate amongst the break-away or most radical of Catholic Reformers, the French Jansenists. St Thomas Aquinas had reservations concerning baptizing babies while they were still in the womb on the grounds that they still do not enjoy an independent life.

What follows confirms what Jacques Foucault has affirmed in his three-volume history of Western sexuality, namely that sex became a case of taboo in the nineteenth century. The Catholic Church and its theologians were still freely discussing sexual relationships between married couples. But the discussion was conducted mostly in Latin. Francesco Emanuele Cangiama was one of these theologians to discuss such relationships. At the same time, he broke with tradition as his works on sexuality were written in vernacular Italian.

Francesco Emanuele Cangiama was born in Palermo in 1702. Highly cultured, he became a doctor of law at the age of 16 but had a change of heart in 1723, when he decided to start studying theology. In 1728 he was ordained a Jesuit priest. While serving as parish priest, he dedicated himself to setting up an establishment for educating young girls and concentrated his efforts on children abandoned in infancy. He also dedicated himself to the cause of saving the souls of foetuses, preaching the need to perform caesarean sections on any woman who had died before giving birth to her baby, independently of the length of the pregnancy.⁶⁸ This was extremely important since in the Catholic Church, baptism is valid only if performed on a living baby. In case of a premature death, baptism had no redeeming effect.⁶⁹ In 1745, he published a book in Palermo called *Embriologia Sacra* concerning the well-being of babies in the womb, describing how doctors could undertake a successful Caesarian section.

67 Petrucci, "Abela", 46.

68 M. Cordorelli, "Cangiama Francesco Emanuele", *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, Vol. 18 (Rome: Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, 1975), 72-74.

69 M. Cordorelli, "Note su Stato e Chiesa nel pensiero degli scrittori giansenisti siciliani del secolo XVIII", *Il Diritto Ecclesiastico*, 68/1 (1957): 391-344. See Francesco Emanuele Cangiama, *Compendio della Embriologia Sacra*, seconda edizione (Livorno, 1756), 113-118.

Yet Cangiamila did not only deliberate the issue of the Caesarian section, he also discussed abortion. In this, he found the support of French-born Paul Alpheran de Bussan, Bishop of Malta. He corresponded with Cangiamila and one of de Bussan's letters on the subject of abortion was published by Cangiamila in the second edition of *Embriologia Sacra*. Cangiamila's aim was to demonstrate to those who held ecclesiastical power that the death penalty or similar harsh penalties, as advocated by Sixtus V, were not the solution to the abortion issue. On the contrary, Cangiamila advocated the need of great caution when dealing with such situations. The punishment of past crimes did not interest him: he was only interested in putting an end to all types of abortion in the future.⁷⁰ Thus, Cangiamila was not afraid to show that excommunication and the death penalty were practically useless as weapons to prevent women from committing wilful abortions. According to him, women were committing abortion because they found themselves in desperate situations, unable to defend themselves from the stigma of shame even though the natural instinct of a woman is to protect her baby.

For this reason, Cangiamila invited all priests to obviate all types of abortions – voluntary and involuntary – by showing understanding and acts of charity towards mothers. He added that certain cases of abortion, in particular miscarriages, which at this time were termed involuntary abortions, were due to problems of malnutrition and extreme poverty.⁷¹ The other cause of abortion, referring to stillbirths, was due to the fact that “*women in labour lost their baby through lack of assistance*”.⁷² Cangiamila listed a number of instances when miscarriages could take place but he stressed that if deliberate, then abortion was being committed. Moreover, he was concerned with domestic violence; the ill-treatment of pregnant wives by husbands, including cane beating, only too often led to abortion. Furthermore, there was the issue of imprudence by some pregnant mothers by undertaking long journeys, or carrying heavy objects.

Cangiamila insisted on allowing pregnant women to taste drinks and food that they fancied. Women had to ensure they maintained their health, avoided a foolish way of life (*vivendo alla balorda*), including intemperance (*con intemperanza*). Quarrels had to be avoided as these could give rise to psychological depression, identified through an increase of melancholy, fear, anger, persecution and other ailments. Other causes identified by Cangiamila were extreme fasting (*digiuni smoderati*), dancing and wearing tight clothing.⁷³ Cangiamila dwells on the issue

70 Cangiamila, *Compendio*, 5: “ricorra dunque ai superiori, non già per farle punire di morte o di simile altra pena, per cui egli incorrerebbe nella irregolarità, ma solo accioché colle dovute proteste, e cautele cerchi, non già la punizione dei delitti passati; ma un forte argine, e preservativo pé futuri”.

71 Ibid.: “che molte donne abortiscono per povertà”.

72 Ibid.: “...quante misere pregnanti tutto giorno abortiscono per mancanza di soccorso”.

73 Ibid., 3.

of intercourse during pregnancy. Sex practised during the first seven days from conception (but one cannot understand how a woman could have known her state at such an early stage) was to be avoided. Another theory was that sex with pregnant women was to be totally avoided as it either caused abortion or provoked a difficult labour, which could result in the death of the mother.⁷⁴

The procurement of certain herbs that induced abortion began to gain popularity in the Mediterranean, in particular in the south of Sicily and Malta.⁷⁵ Cangiamila speaks in terms of grave sin for anyone using or procuring these medicines or other methods that may impede conception. The gravity of the sin increased if the medicines were intended to cause abortion.⁷⁶ Cangiamila specifically accused doctors of such malpractice. These doctors, according to Cangiamila, accepted to perform abortion in order to help families who faced ruin. Midwives too were involved in these malpractices. Cangiamila realized that most of the so-called voluntary abortions concerned mainly young females whom he identified as teenagers. Due to their fragile nature, shame or fear of their parents were recurring themes. Cangiamila also insisted that priests had to give shelter to young pregnant women who were escaping from their fathers' wrath. The clergy was invited to act responsibly to entrust these cases to the care of a good and honest matron.⁷⁷

Yet Cangiamila also observed young girls, in particular among noble families, resorting to abortions to keep their figure or to avoid future birth pains. The above considerations are to be found in case documents handled by the tribunal of the Inquisition in Malta in the 18th century. Furthermore, copies of Cangiamila's book were in the hands of important ecclesiastics, including Alpheran's successor, Bishop Bartolomeo Rull. Midwives began to be screened on this topic while medical doctors were slowly being introduced to be present when women were delivering their babies. The first to avail themselves of the doctor's service were those who could afford it. It would be extended to the rest of the population in the following centuries.⁷⁸

74 Ibid., 10: "*Onde molti Dottori proibiscono sotto grave peccato ai congiugati i congressi maritali nei primi sette giorni dopo il concepimento, e nel tempo vicino al parto, per lo pericolo che la donna non abortisca. Benché Rainaudo gli esenti da quest'obbligo*".

75 J. Testa, *Aspects of Maltese Family Life: Parish of Porto Salvo 1600-1650* (Unpublished M.A. dissertation, University of Malta, 1980), 91; Josephine Ann Cini, *Women in Malta in the Eighteenth Century* (Unpublished B.Ed. Hons. Dissertation, University of Malta, 1988).

76 Cangiamila, *Compendio*, 10: "*molto piu lo è il procurare l'aborto, eziandio del feto inanimato*".

77 Ibid., 8.

78 Ibid., 10.

A Debate through Painting

While these theological discussions were going on, the same popes who were making declarations against abortion, attributing to it the same principle of manslaughter, began to promote the cult of the Immaculate Conception. Thus, a battle would be waged on another front; not only through a formal theological debate but through the use of iconographic representations in Roman Catholic churches. Painters and sculptures began to popularize this anti-abortion message to the faithful. The cult of the Immaculate Conception would gain a privileged place in this new type of propaganda. It was the different iconographies of the Virgin Mary produced over the centuries that Warner would use in support of her arguments about the development of the cult. However, when it comes to analyze those related to the Immaculate Conception, including the hidden symbols behind the images, she errs gravely.

Warner rightly affirms that a twist occurred in 14th- and 15th-century Europe, when the statues of the *Vierge Ouvrante* or *Shrine Madonna* – a sculptured triptych of the Virgin Mary with 2 doors or wings in the front part of her body – started to appear. Once opened, the sculpture presents an iconographical cycle of the Trinity, the life of Christ or the Life of the Virgin – turning them into objects of devotion.⁷⁹ However, these effigies were not related by Warner to the emerging question of abortion.

The iconography of the *Vierge Ouvrante* was accompanied in the 15th century by another new image of the Virgin Mary, presented now in an advanced state of pregnancy. A cult referred to as the *Madonna del Parto* (the Madonna of Parturition) started in Italy; this theme began being depicted in the early 14th century in Tuscany and continued into the following century with the work of Piero della Francesca, followed by Taddeo Gaddi, Bernardo Daddi and Nardo di Cione whose portrayals were to be followed later, in 1660, by Bartolome Esteban Murillo's *Immaculate Conception*.

The link between these cults, the issue of abortion and the Immaculate Conception is present in the day chosen to celebrate the liturgical feast of the Immaculate Conception. From the 15th century onwards, the Church started to celebrate, on December 8, the feast of the Madonna under the title *del Soccorso*, that is *Our Lady of Succours*. This cult was strongly promoted in Sicily by the Augustinian Friars,⁸⁰ who as we have seen, were the main promoters of the Virgin of the Girdle. What is of greater importance is the fact that the Virgin Mary *del Soccorso* started to be invoked mostly by mothers in labour for a safe delivery.⁸¹

79 Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, 47.

80 Bonaventura Attardi, *Monachesimo in Sicilia* (Palermo: Antonio Gramignani, 1741), 185.

81 Simon Mercieca, *Community Life in the Central Mediterranean. A Socio-Demographic Study of*

It was a natural process that when the feast of the Immaculate Conception gained stronger roots in the South, in particular in the 18th century, the cult of the Virgin Mary *del Soccorso* lost its pride of place and was replaced by the one of the Immaculate Conception.

By the 14th century, Warner inform us, the artists “*wanted to send a message about the sweet, gentle, meek and tender character of the Virgin*”⁸² and the best way to present this new strain of poignant intimacy was by having the Virgin represented holding her son in her hands.⁸³ Yet, in such a choice, one cannot fail from seeing the return, or perhaps the continuation of the affirmation of the iconographic presentation of Mary inspired by the conclusion reached by the Ecumenical Council of Ephesus, in 431, when she was declared *Theotokos* or the Bearer of God. Historians agree that this Council revolutionized the way Christians look at Mary. From this point onwards, the way in which she would be depicted in art or invoked in the liturgy was changed permanently. To better affirm the idea of the Bearer of God, Mary began to be represented holding or carrying an infant in her arms. The only exception to this iconographic presentation came with the depiction of Our Lady as a pregnant mother. As already explained, this representation started with the *Vierge Ouvrante*, continued with that of the *Madonna del Soccorso* and would reach its apex with the cult of the Immaculate Conception. Warner admits that the image of the Immaculate Conception became the most popular in southern Europe, in Sicily and Spain. Its effigy found place of honour both in churches and marketplaces.⁸⁴ However, Warner fails to account for why such an image became so important for Southern Europe.

This new twist explains why the cult of the Immaculate Conception achieved great popularity in the Mediterranean, irrespective of any anthropological reading, in attributing to the Mediterranean people the honour and shame label, while reserving the label of guilt as a direct result of St Augustine’s popularity in Northern Protestant Europe. The cult of the Immaculate Conception became *par excellence* the image to represent the Madonna as a mother in an advanced state of pregnancy so that there would be no mistake regarding the theological message that these images were intended to procure. The idea of *Theotokos* ceased to be only represented by the figure of the Madonna bearing the infant Jesus in her arms. Now, the same message began to be manifested through an

the Maltese Harbour Towns in Early Modern Times. Bormla: 1587 – 1815 (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Paris, Paris IV-Sorbonne, 2002), vide chapter Chapter 7 on “Abortion in Cottonera: A Social Dilemma or a Primitive Method of Birth Control?”

82 Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, 183.

83 Ibid., 182.

84 Ibid., 246.

advanced gestation. From the early images of the Immaculate Conception, the Virgin started to be represented in an advanced state of pregnancy.

Basing her arguments on the aesthetics of art, Warner insists that the Image of the Immaculate Conception did not reach visual perfection, until 17th-century Spanish artists like Velasquez (d. 1660,) Zurbaran (d. 1664), Ribera (d. 1652) and Murillo (d. 1682) excelled themselves in this particular devotion.⁸⁵ While admitting that Murillo represented an altogether new image of the Virgin, Warner considered Murillo's *Aranjuez Conception*, now in the Prado, as a representative of the new image which Warner wrongly qualifies as showing "*Mary as a young girl, neither child nor woman, abiding in the pleroma of youth and beauty, as she existed in the mind of God 'before the beginning'*",⁸⁶ without noticing that Murillo's depictions of the Madonna are also young ladies in an advanced state of pregnancy.

In fact, the Spanish artist, Bartolome Esteban Murillo, would be the one to immortalize this state in an ecstasy of colour and beauty in his paintings. His images of the Immaculate Conception remain the most famous. All are represented as a woman in an advanced state of pregnancy. He took care to surround her with cherubs or putti, painted in a glorified way, as homage to childhood. This craze by Murillo to become the *par excellence* painter of the Immaculate Conception followed the publication, in 1662, of a Bull by Alexander VII on the Immaculate Conception of Mary. Incidentally, before being elected pope, Alexander VII, was the Church of Rome's Inquisitor in Malta.⁸⁷

Another late baroque painter to respond to Alexander VII's great love for the Madonna was the Italian painter, Carlo Maratta; he would do in Rome what Murillo was doing in Seville, painting what Griselda Murray-Brown, provokingly described as Catholic kitsch paintings,⁸⁸ mostly images of the Madonna, to the extent that he was nicknamed *Carluccio delle Madonne* or 'Little Carlo of the Madonnas'. Among the subject chosen by Maratta, one finds paintings inspired by the Biblical story of the Visitation of Mary to her relative Elizabeth. He chose the moment of the departure of Mary from the house of Elizabeth. Mary was now approaching her time to give birth, thus Maratta presented Mary in advanced state of pregnancy. Thanks to the reproduction of lithographs, such a painting was imitated in many churches in Malta.⁸⁹

85 Ibid., 247-248.

86 Ibid., 248.

87 Griselda Murray-Brown, "Theology for the masses", in <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/2/a8ea8180-720f-11e2-89fb-00144feab49a.html#axzz2L4WUEUD5>

88 Ibid.

89 For example, a painting inspired from the Visitation of the Madonna to Elizabeth by Maratta can today be seen in the sacristy of Senglea's parish church.

Such a representation of the Immaculate Conception was not restricted to icons or paintings but extended to sculptured images. In Malta, Valletta and the area of the harbour known as Cottonera, began to commission processional statues with the image of the Madonna, as a popular expression of religious piety and pilgrimage. It is interesting to note that in Cottonera, during the 17th century, all the three parishes in the area held yearly processions using the statue of the Immaculate Conception, although none of the churches was dedicated to her⁹⁰ and that of Cospicua, which was the largest of these three parishes, had two statues.⁹¹ The first one was an *image a vestir* and the second a wooden statue. The latter was the work of a female artist, Maria de Domenicis, who was also a tertiary sister and a follower of Mattia Preti. She represented the Madonna in an advanced state of pregnancy ensuring that the navel was clearly visible.⁹² The painted iconography of the Immaculate Conception for our Maltese churches too began to show Mary with an unmistakably protruding tummy.⁹³

Conclusion

Warner affirms that “the belief in the Immaculate Conception became an act of defiance against the age of reason” or what Warner terms rationalism”.⁹⁴ In this background, it was logical, Warner continues to state, “for Pius IX to proclaim the infallibility of the pope as a dogma of the Church in 1870 after having issued too the Bull of the Immaculate Conception in 1854”.⁹⁵ Küng has no reservations

90 The parish of Senglea, known also as *l-Isla*, was dedicated to Our Lady of Victory whose feast day fell on 8 September, but a statue of the Immaculate Conception was used for the procession. The Birgu parish was dedicated to St Lawrence. Yet, the most important feast celebrated at this parish during this time was the Immaculate Conception, which was taken out in procession.

91 The first one was made in the fashion of “*image a vestir*”, a model dressed up. This statue belonged to the parish and was taken out on the 8th December. There was another statue of the Immaculate Conception made entirely of wood. It was owned by the Confraternity of the Rosary at the same parish and was used in the procession of the Holy Rosary, which was, and still is, celebrated on the first Sunday in October. This statue is popularly attributed to the nun Sr Maria De Domenicis, a follower of Mattia Preti.

92 In the middle of the 18th century, this old wooden statue of the Immaculate Conception was donated to the rural village of Qrendi, where it was used in all the Marian processions organized by this parish dedicated to the Assumption. See Simon Mercieca, “L-Istatwa Antika tal-Kunċizzjoni: Hsibijiet dwar l-Abort u r-Rispett lejn il-Ħajja Umana”, *Soċjetà Mużikali Lourdes Qrendi, Festa 2010* (Malta: 2010), 131-134.

93 Mercieca, *Community Life*, vide Chapter 7, “Abortion in Cottonera: A Social Dilemma or a Primitive Method of Birth Control?”

94 Warner, *Alone of all Her Sex*, 237.

95 Ibid.

regarding Pope Pius IX (Giovanni Maria Mastai-Ferretti, 1792-1878) who, with his theological dogma in 1854, was the reason why the Church took such a strong stand against Modernism. Pope Pius IX, who had declared the Bull of the Immaculate Conception, was the one and the same Pope who opposed the Unification of Italy, viewed himself as Papa-Re and issued the Syllabus of Errors thus paving the way for the Church to take its contemporary stand against abortion.

Ironically, once the Immaculate Conception became a dogma of Faith, these old iconographic attributes stopped being associated with the Immaculate Conception. Her 19th-century representations stopped being associated with pregnancy. In return, all over the Catholic Church, she began to be represented as a slight young maiden in an ecstasy of glory, to the extent, that the iconographical representation of Mary had an interesting turn at the beginning of the 20th century. The Catholic Church began to find that some of the contemporary slim images of the Virgin inappropriate, as they did not represent the theological concept of *Theotokos* or the bearer of God. Thus, a decree was issued by Rome on 5th August 1913, whereby any representation of Mary, with the exception of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption, had always to be shown holding baby Jesus in her hands.⁹⁶

Warner failed to find the answer for such a change in this cult in the simple words of Bernadette Soubirous, who in 1858, had visions of the Virgin. Warner states that Bernadette was anxiously questioned by eminent churchmen about the Virgin's looks. They showed the young girl many of the world's most revered paintings of the Virgin – by Leonardo, Raphael, Botticelli, Durer – and asked her which was the most accurate. Bernadette was horrified. '*My dear Mother, how they slander you!*' she exclaimed. Instead she insisted that the local statue of the Virgin was a perfect likeness.

Theology and art aesthetics cease to be a high-brow affair as understood in previous centuries. Without knowing, Bernadette Soubirous, in her simplicity was expressing the new direction that these two different disciplines would embark on, which Milan Kundera has succinctly phrased as "*the unbearable likeness of being*" or what twentieth-century art aesthetics termed as minimalism.

In reality, the views expressed by Warner and Küng have one common inspiration. They are both inspired by the Victorian age whose positivistic view of history was far more interested to understand and accept the Protestant mores of

96 Mark Cauchi and Simon Mercieca, *Vetustior Glorior – Il-Mixja Storika minn Eremitaġġ għall-Monasteru Agostinjan fir-Rabat tal-Imdina c. 1300 – 2000* (forthcoming). Due to this decree, for example, the Augustinian friars at Rabat Malta changed an old statue of the Madonna, under the title of the Girdle, because it had no representation of baby Jesus with a new one made out of papier-mâché by Ġużeppi Cilia in 1913.

the 19th-century era rather than confronting, or assimilating, the real challenges of this particular Marian cult throughout history. Ironically, the Catholic Church ended up adopting Victorian customs and the Pre-Raphaelite artistic movement, which depicted its best artistic expression in the Anglican world through the talents of William Holman Hunt,⁹⁷ and which became the main artistic inspiration for the Catholic Church throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Soon this new Protestant artistic drift began to leave its mark on local religious art and Church history. The refusal, if ever there was one, of portraying the Virgin as a pregnant mother, is to be associated with this newly-established religious tradition.

This explains why the cult of the Immaculate Conception, after reaching its apex in its devotional history through the fervour created around the Madonna's appearances at Lourdes in France, started to wane in devotional importance and is now crepuscular. This did not occur as explained by Küng because this cult was the feeble reply of the Catholic Church to the challenges of the modern age, but because the same Catholic Church started to embrace the Victorian precepts and sexual inhibitions surrounding pregnancies, which developed in Northern Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries. These ideas relied on the scientific theory of the time but they were never part of the dominant thoughts of the previous centuries, and the iconographic images of the Immaculate Conception are the undeniable proof of the Catholic Church's pro-active stand towards sexual reproduction during early modern times.

97 MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity*, 828.